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Big Urban Things

Nathan Geller

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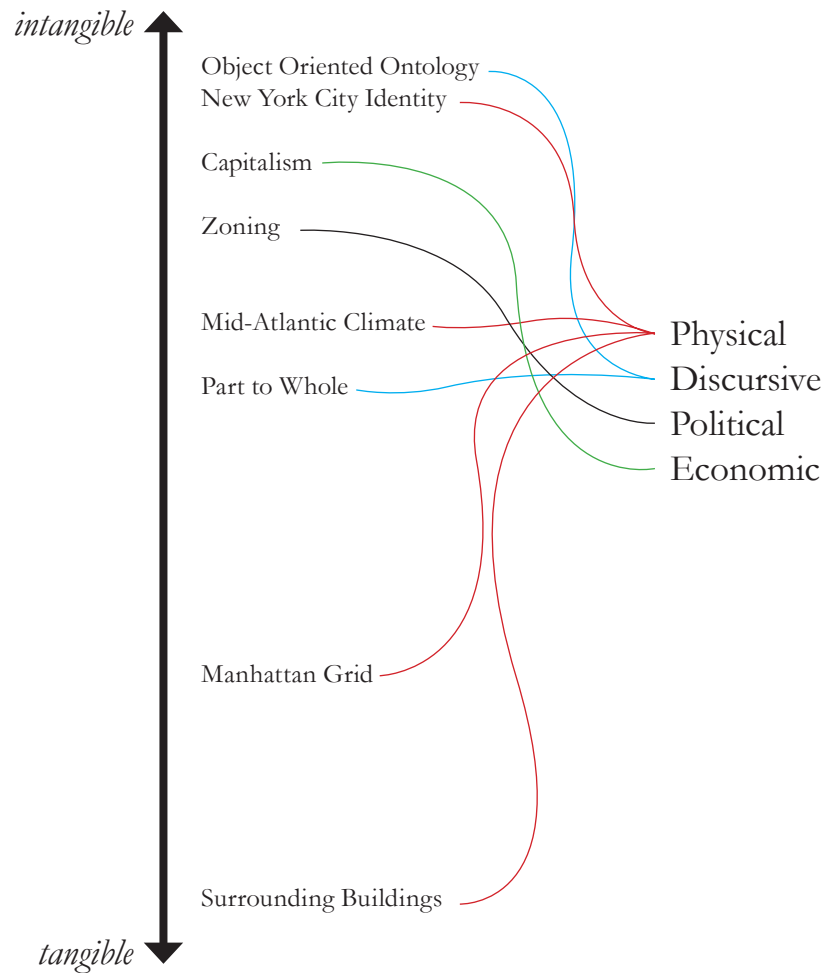
Big Urban Things

*Nathan Geller
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Syracuse University*

This project has evolved from an interest in architecture's role and impact in the city, as well as a developing interest in the philosophy of Object Oriented Ontology.¹ As a way to explore these interests, this project is about contextualizing Bigness² through the writings of Graham Harman.

¹ *Object Oriented Ontology is a movement in contemporary philosophy founded by Graham Harman that rejects the privilegedging of human existence over that of nonhuman objects.*

² *Rem Koolhaas, "Bigness," in XMLXL (1994) 495-516.*



Context

Physical

Also identified as sensual context, physical context is characterized as anything that can be perceived or felt by the subject. This includes the buildings in the city, the grid of the city, the climate of the city, and the city's identity.

Discursive

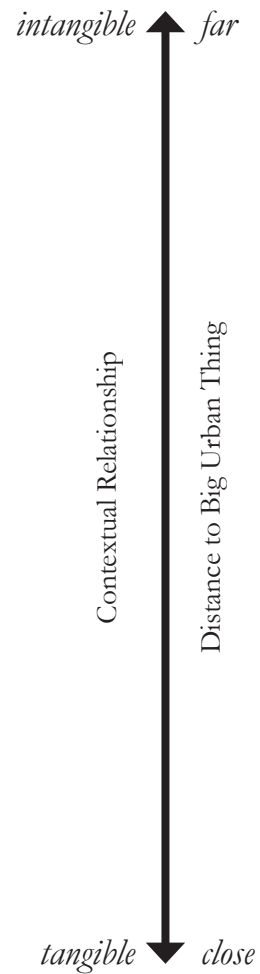
Discursive context pertains to influences from contemporary architectural discourse that influences the building's design.

Political

The political context presents itself in the form of zoning laws and building codes.

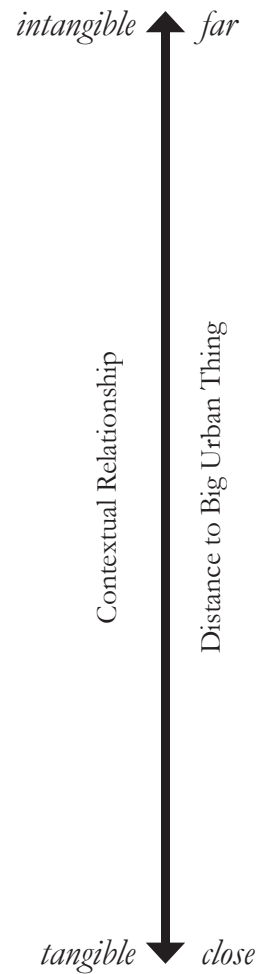
Economic

The economic context of capitalism also influences design decisions.



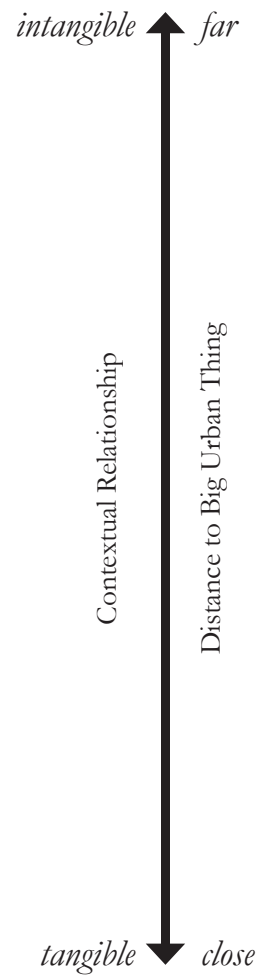
Context

When considering context, the relations between people and objects and objects and objects present themselves differently depending on scale and the distance to the Big Urban Thing.



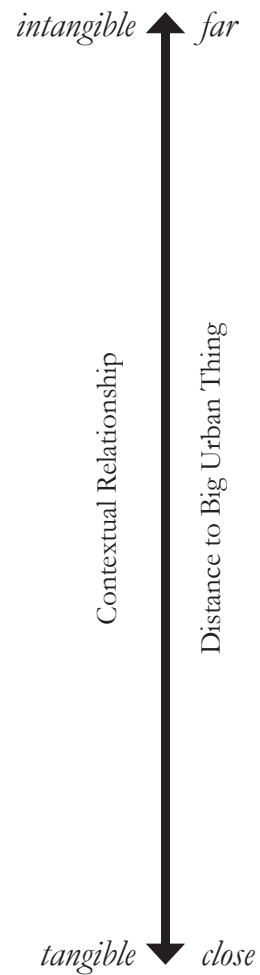
Context

When closest to a Big Urban Thing, the contextual relationship is much more tangible. The building form relates to its context through the framing of views, adjacencies to other buildings, and its relationship with the user.



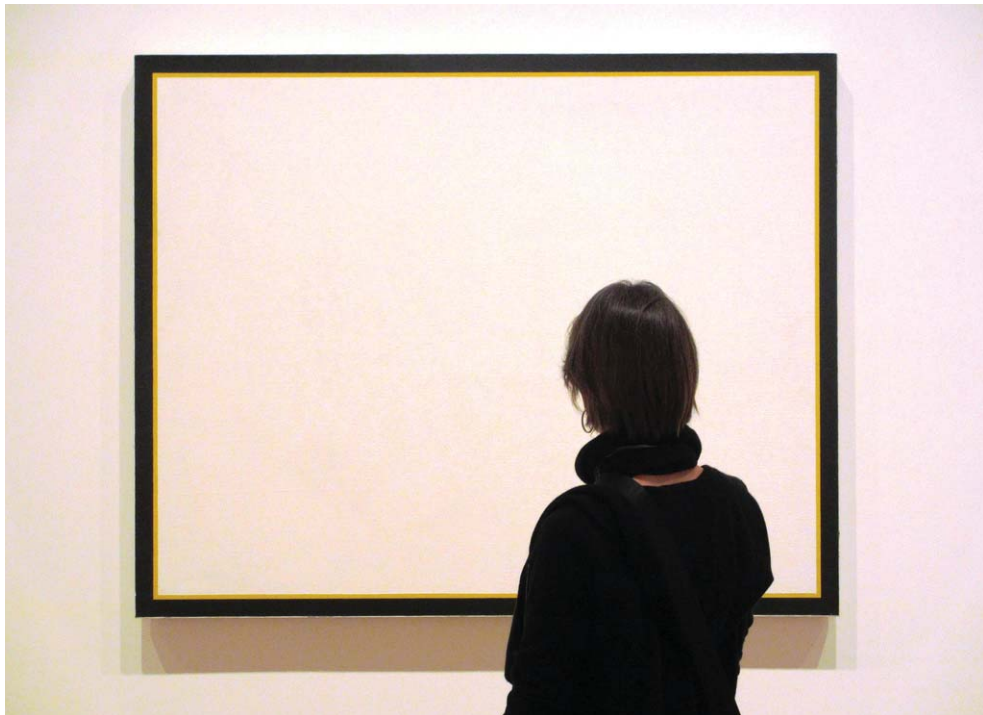
Context

Slightly further from the Big Urban Thing, the contextual relationship mediates between a tangible relation and intangible relation. The relationship to the context presents itself as a more nuanced relational form and posturing within its surrounding context.



Context

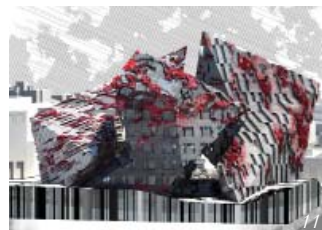
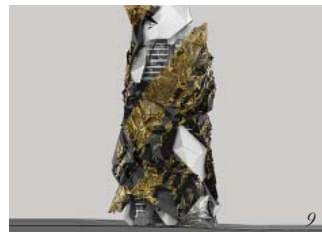
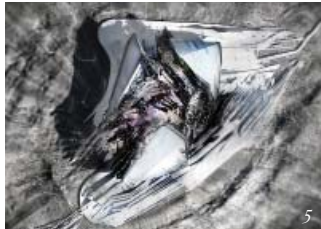
At the furthest point from the Big Urban Thing, the contextual relationship is primarily intangible. In this sense, a Big Urban Thing relates to its context by reacting to the city's identity, character, and essence.



The interest with context, and being contextual, is born from the belief that the ultimate manifestation of architecture is in the built environment. What separates architecture from the fine arts of sculpture and painting is its unavoidable interaction with not only intangible context but tangible context as well.



Architecture According to suckerPUNCH



When considering recent projects that claim to be driven by the influence of Object Oriented Ontology, a lack of a rigorous study of architecture and its context presents itself as a major shortcoming.

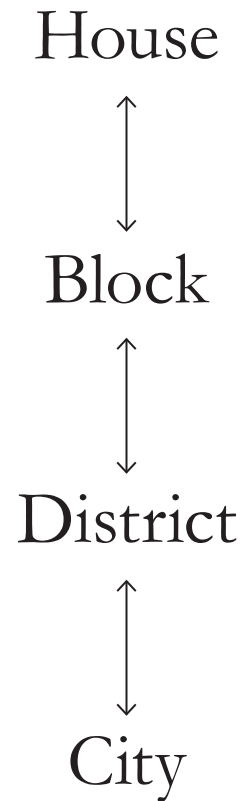
-
- 1 Cody Clancy, Zach Hoffmann, Alyssa Johnston, Braden Scott. "The Synthetic Proto-Image".
 - 2 Zach Grzybowski, Maria Nikolovski, Danica Selem. "Objectified Field".
 - 3 Zach Beale. "The Infernal".
 - 4 Megan Cheung, Andrew Gardner. "Maximalism: Ferrari Headquarters".
 - 5 Daniel Caven. "Anamorphic Carcasses".
 - 6 Chunlan Zeng. "Agglomeration Apartments".
 - 7 Shane Bearrow. "The Birth and Reverberation of an Object".
 - 8 Moksud Khan. "Object-Oriented Artifacts".
 - 9 Zach Beale. "Speculative Duplicity".
 - 10 Cedric Al Kazgi, JiaRui Su. "Objects in Objects on Objects".
 - 11 Alex Blugerman, Smita Lukose. "Withdrawn".



Object Oriented Ontology

Flat Ontology—Vicarious Causation

Object Oriented Ontology claims that all objects, human or otherwise, belong on the same ontological plane. This places the object to object relationship that buildings have with one another on the same level as a person's relationship to a building. In speaking of these relations, Graham Harman introduces vicarious causation as a way to understand and characterize the way in which objects interact with one another. These characterizations (Containment, Contiguity, Sincerity, Connection, None) can perhaps begin to inform new ways in which architecture can begin to relate to its context.

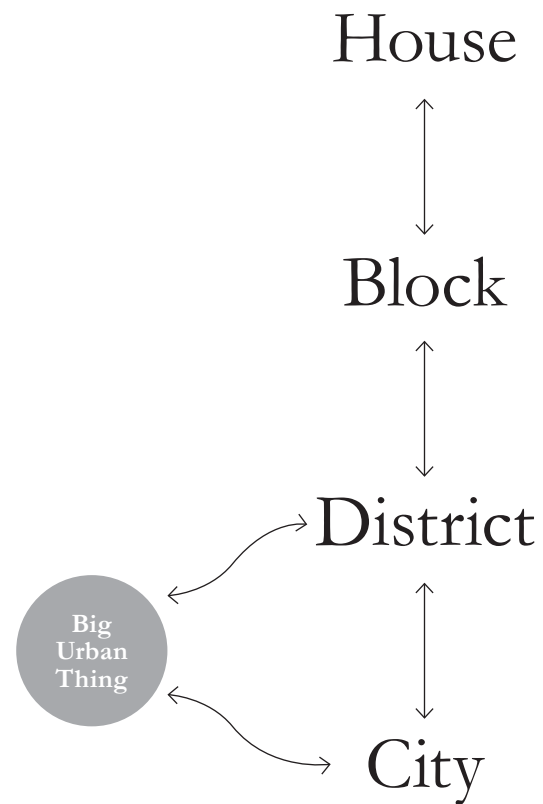


Containment

Architecture Relating to the City

When discussing the problem of context Graham Harman presents this theory of containment which states that a house (or singular building) cannot relate directly to the city as a whole. A house can only relate to its surrounding block, the block can relate to its district or neighborhood, and then that district can relate directly to the city as a whole.

“...many of the relations of containment—one object in another—that you might think are real might not be. It might be that, maybe the house isn’t part of the city. Maybe the house is part of the block and the block is part of the city. The fact that you can state that there is a relation between one object and a larger object doesn’t necessarily mean that it is there.”¹



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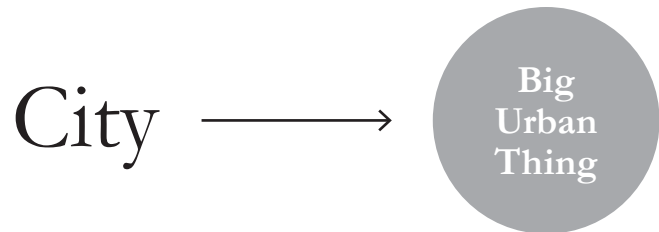
Containment

Architecture Relating to the City

A Big Urban Thing is something that is too large to be contained by anything except for the city. By introducing a Big Urban Thing into the city, the relation of containment is exploited in a way that allows the relationship between building and city to become present.



How does a Big Urban Thing relate to the city in which it exists contextually?



How does a city absorb something that does not fit within its inherent logic?

Big Urban Things

A Big Urban Thing flickers between singular object and a collection of spatial experiences.

A Big Urban Thing is an object and a thing. It oscillates between an object relating to other objects—a physical relationship to built context—and an object in relation to its inhabitants.

A Big Urban Thing is as interested in how its parts relate to one another as how its collective whole relates to the collection of buildings making up the city in which it lives.



Bigness

Beyond a certain scale, architecture acquires the properties of Bigness. The best reason to broach Bigness is the one given by climbers of Mount Everest: "because it is there." Bigness is ultimate architecture.

This impossibility triggers the autonomy of its parts, but that is not the same as fragmentation: the parts remain committed to the whole.

2. The elevator—with its potential to establish mechanical rather than architectural connections—and its family of related inventions render null and void the classical repertoire of architecture. Issues of composition, scale, proportion, detail are now moot. The "art" of architecture is useless in Bigness.

3. In Bigness, the distance between core and envelope increases to the point where the

facade can no longer reveal what happens inside. The humanist expectation of "honesty" is doomed: interior and exterior architectures become separate projects, one dealing with the instability of programmatic and iconographic needs, the other—agent of disinformation—offering the city the apparent stability of an object.

Where architecture reveals, Bigness perplexes; Bigness transforms the city from a summation of certainties into an accumulation of mysteries. What you see is no longer what you get.

4. Through size alone, such build-

ings enter an amoral domain. Beyond good or bad, their impact is independent of their quality.

5. Together, all these breaks—with scale, with architectural composition, with tradition, with transparency, with ethics—imply the final, most radical break: Bigness is no longer part of any urban tissue.

It exists at most, it coexists; its subtext is lack of context.

In 1978, Bigness seemed a phenomenon of and for (the) New World(s). But in the second half of the eighties, signs multiplied

of a new wave of modernization that would engulf—in more or less camouflaged form—the Old World, provoking episodes of a new beginning even on the "fin-de-siècle" continent.

Against the background of Europe, the shock of Bigness forced us to make what was implicit in *Delirious New York* explicit in our work.

Bigness became a double-edged sword, confronting earlier attempts at integration and concentration and contemporary doctrines that question the possibility of the Whole and the Real as viable categories and resign themselves

first "sold that melts into air" through the combined effects of demographic trends, electronics, media, speed, the economy, culture, the death of God, the book, the phone, the fax, the airplane, democracy, the end of the Big Story...

Prempting architecture's actual disappearance, its avant-garde is experimenting with real or simulated virtuality, reclaiming in the name of modernity its former omnipotence in the world of virtual reality (where fascism may be pursued with impunity).

Paradoxically, the Whole and the Real ceased to exist as possible enterprises for the architect exactly at the moment where the approaching end of the age, and millennium saw an all-out rush to

reorganization, consolidation, expansion, clamoring for megaprojects. Other words emerged: an entire metropolitan area was reshaped; finally, of exploiting dramatic social and economic events that, if constructed, could reshape the credibility.

The absence of a theory of Bigness—what is the maximum beyond which architecture's most debilitating weakness, without a theory of Bigness, architects are in the position of Frank Lloyd Wright's disciples, designers of a partly successful experiment whose results are running amok and are therefore discredited.

Because there is no theory of Bigness, we don't know what to do with it, we don't know where to put it, we don't know when to use it, we don't know how to

and quantity rather than quality, only Bigness can support genuinely new urban forms. In fact, the entire apparatus of autonomy invented at the beginning of the century to separate relationships between the dependent parts—are being undone by one section of the present avant-garde in compositions of almost laughable regularity and rigidity, behind apparent technicalities.

The second strategy, disappearance, transmits the gesture of Bigness and massive presence—through an extended engagement with simulation, virtuality, nonexistence.

A patchwork of argument scavenged since the sixties from American sociologists, ideologists, philosophers, French intellectuals, cyberneticists, etc., suggests that architecture will be the

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It seems incredible that the size of a building alone embodies an ideological program, independent of the will of its architects. Of all possible categories, Bigness does not seem to deserve a manifesto; discredited as an intellectual problem, it is apparently on its way to extinction—like

the dinosaur—through clumsiness, slowness, inflexibility, difficulty. But in fact, only Bigness instigates the regime of complexity that mobilizes the full intelligence of architecture and its related fields.

One hundred years ago, a generation of conceptual breakthroughs

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and supporting technologies unleashed an architectural Big Bang. By randomizing circulation, short-circuiting distance, artificializing interiors, reducing mass, stretching dimensions, and accelerating construction, the elevator, electricity, air-conditioning, steel, and finally, the new infrastructures formed a cluster of mutations that induced another species of architecture. The combined effects of these inventions were structures taller and deeper—Bigger—than ever before conceived, with a parallel potential for the reorganization of the

social world—a vastly richer programming.

Fueled initially by the thoughtless energy of the purely quantitative, Bigness has been, for nearly a century, a condition almost without thinkers, a revolution without program. *Delirious New York* implied a latent "Theory of Bigness" based on five theorems.

1. Beyond a certain critical mass, a building becomes a Big Building. Such a mass can no longer be controlled by a single architectural gesture, or even by any combination of architectural gestures,

to architecture's supposedly inevitable massiveness and desolation. European had supposed the threat of Bigness by theorizing it beyond the point of apogee. Their contribution had been the "gift" of the megamachine: a kind of all-embracing, all-enabling technical support that ultimately questioned the status of the individual building; a very safe Bigness, its true implications excluding implementation.

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had proposed spaces where "anything" was possible. The resulting flexibility was unmasked as the imposition of a theoretical average at the expense of both character and precision—more at the price of identity. Perversely, its sheer demonstrativeness precluded the gain line neutrality realized without effort in the American skyscraper.

So marked was the generation of May '68, my generation—supremely intelligent, well informed, correctly numanized by elected catechisms, frank in its borrowings from other disciplines—by the failure of this and similar models of density and integration—by their systematic insensitivity to the particular—that I proposed two major defense lines: dismantlement and disappearance.

place it. Big mistakes are not only corrected but possible.

But in spite of its dumb name, Bigness is a theoretical domain at this late date, in a landscape of theory, democracy, discourse, deconstruction, the attraction of Bigness is its potential to reconstruct the Whole, resurrect the Real, reinvent the collective, reclaim maximum

possibility. Only through Bigness can architecture liberate itself from the exhausted architectural movements of modernism and formalism to regain its immortality.

By its vehicle of modernization, Bigness recognizes that architecture as we know it is in difficulty, but it does not overcompensate through reorganization of even more architecture. It proposes a new economy in which no longer "all is architecture," but in which a strategic point

now is regained through retreat and counterattack, yielding the point to a constant territory to enemy forces.

Bigness develops, but it does not begin again. It can reassemble what it breaks. A paradox of Bigness is that in spite of the calculation that goes into its planning, it is, through its very rigidity—in its one architecture that engineers the unpredictable, instead of embracing coincidence, Bigness depends on regimes of breakdown, the assembly of maximum difference.

Only Bigness can sustain a permanent proliferation of events in a single context. It develops strategies to separate both these independence and interdependence within a larger unity as a symptom that exorcises rather than compensates specificity. Through contamination rather than purity

events will be swallowed by Bigness. There is no "back" to which one can retreat, no inoperable, too definite, too secure, too universal, too weak, too "nothing" to be part of the contemplation of Bigness. Bigness is the last house of architecture: a contradiction, a hyper-architecture. The conclusion of Bigness will be landmarks in a post-architectural landscape—a world shaped of architecture in the way Richard's paintings are shaped of paint, reflecting, multiplying, multiplying, forever more, and through superimposed effect, Bigness surrounds the field to alter its limits, not



facade can no longer reveal what happens inside. The humanist expectation of “honesty” is doomed: interior and exterior architectures become separate projects, one dealing with the instability of programmatic and iconographic needs, the other—agent of disinformation—offering the city the apparent stability of an object.

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It exists; at most, it coexists.

Its subtext is *fuck* context.

Modernization

In 1978, Bigness seemed a phenomenon of and for (the) New World(s). But in the second half of the eighties, signs multiplied

Graham Harman
Object Oriented
Ontology

Architecture can only be related to
the city through a level of Bigness

HOWEVER

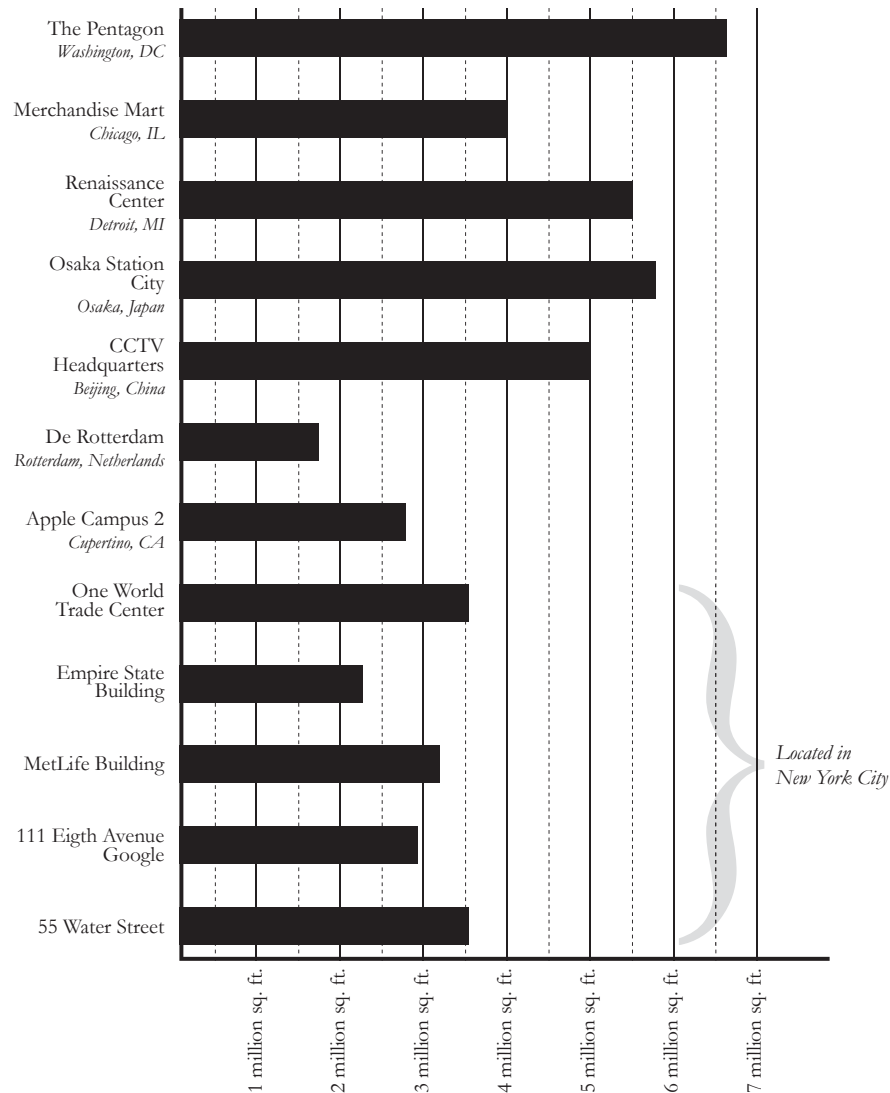
Rem Koolhaas
Bigness

Bigness as a theory negates the
relationship between architecture
and the city.

Harman and Koolhaas

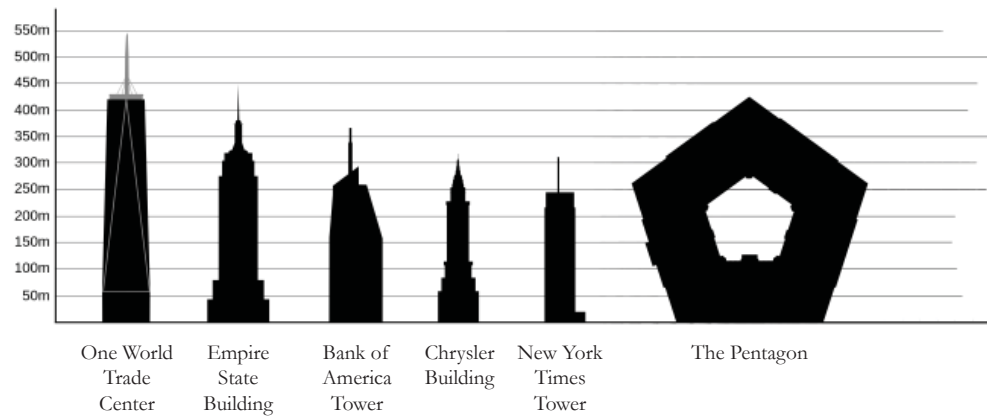
Koolhaas' assertion that once architecture expands to a certain scale that the relationship between building and context becomes internalized creates an interesting paradox when read through the writing of Graham Harman.

It is within this paradox where Big Urban Things find themselves situated. By revisiting Koolhaas' explanation of Bigness through the writings of Graham Harman, architecture can *only* be related directly to the city through a level of Bigness.



Big Urban Things *by square footage*

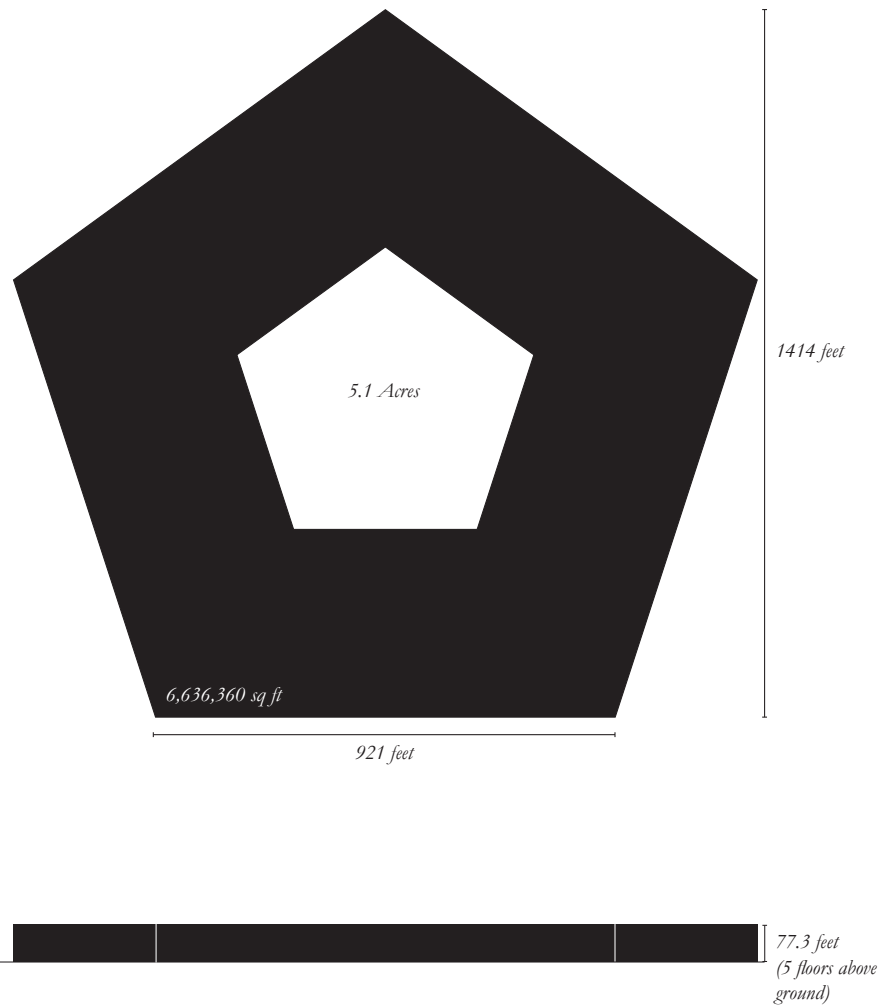
When looking at existing buildings that can be considered Big Urban Things and comparing their size in terms of square footage to some of the largest buildings in New York City, we can see that the introduction of a Big Urban Thing into New York City quickly becomes the largest project in Manhattan. This perhaps suggests that the strict logic of the grid in Manhattan does not easily accommodate the introduction of a Big Urban Thing. Thusly, by introducing a Big Urban Thing into Manhattan, and forcing the grid to adjust, new frictions and relationships will be revealed.



Proposed Trajectory

Redesigning the Pentagon in New York City

When comparing the Pentagon to some of the tallest buildings in New York City, the sheer size of the Pentagon can be appreciated.



Proposed Trajectory

Redesigning the Pentagon in New York City

Primarily composed of offices for the Department of Defense, the Pentagon also contains a large amount of other programmed areas for the convenience of approximately 24,000 employees.

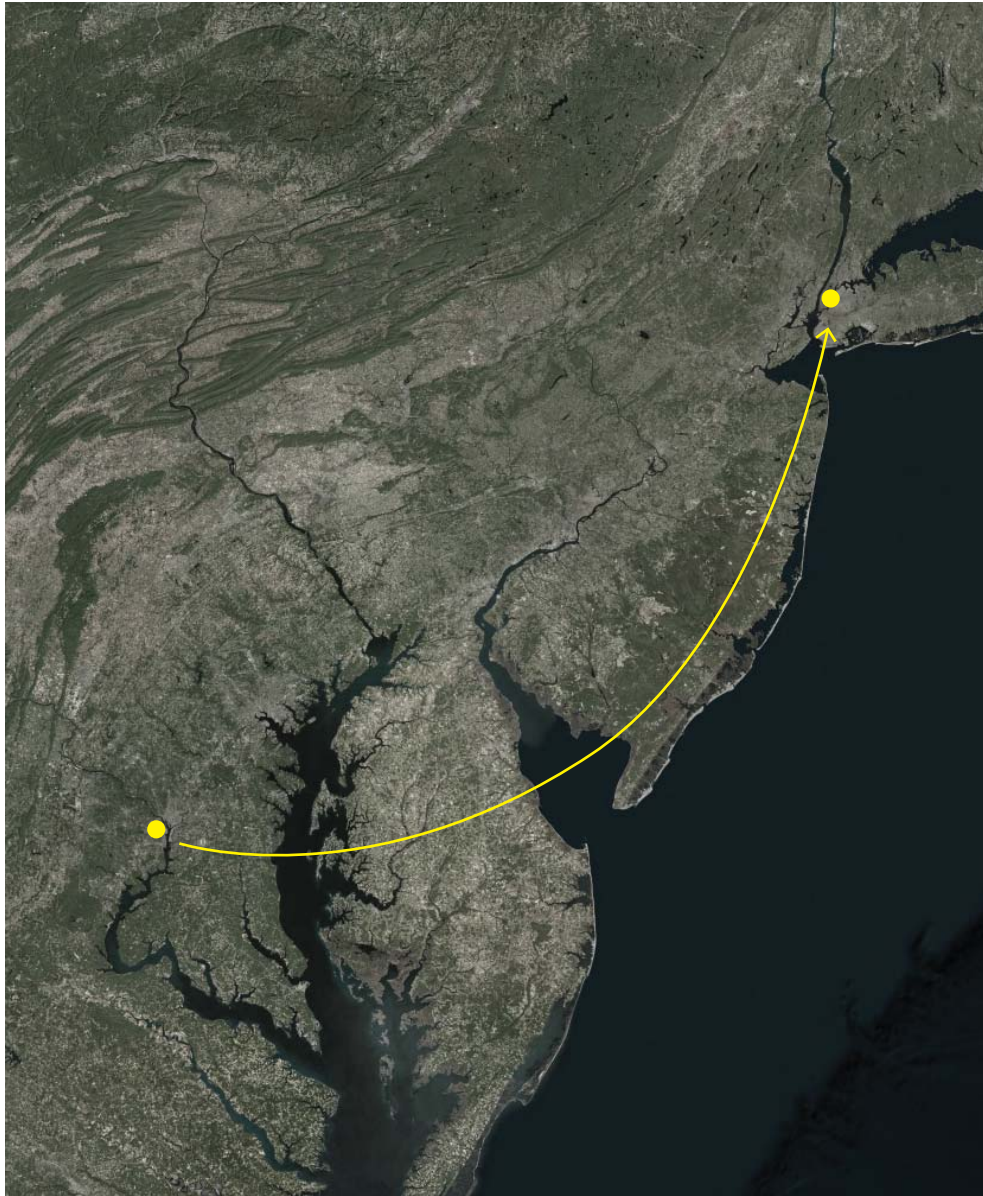
3,700,000 sq ft of Offices
 Pentagon Athletic Center (PAC)
 Meditation and Prayer Rooms
 Hall of Heroes
 (17.5 miles) of circulation
 Food Courts and Shopping Centers



Proposed Trajectory

Redesigning the Pentagon in New York City

Originally, the Pentagon was intended to be built on a different site. It is from this site that the pentagonal shape was derived. When the decision was made to change the site for the original design, time constraints did not allow for a complete redesign. Instead, the irregular pentagon designed for the initial site was transformed into the perfect pentagon of which we are familiar.



Proposed Trajectory

Redesigning the Pentagon in New York City

The Pentagon has been moved before.

Why not move it again?

By relocating and redesigning the Pentagon in New York City, new frictions inherent in the introduction of Big Urban Things into a city—frictions that the current Pentagon avoids—can be brought to the forefront.





